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## Russian Foreign Policy and National Identity

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RUSSIAN FOREIGN POLICY AND NATIONAL IDENTITY

An Honors Thesis

Presented to

the Program of International Studies  
of the University of New Orleans

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Bachelor of Arts, with University High Honors and  
Honors in International Studies

By

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Advised by Dr. Michael Huelshoff

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## Abstract

National identity provides the interpretive framework through which foreign policy makers understand their role in the world and the actions of other states, and can also be utilized as a tool to mobilize public support behind foreign policy maneuvers. Foreign policy in turn is both shaped by constructions of national identity, and often used to forge and substantiate the narratives of national identity which best serve the regime's domestic interests. This thesis will seek to establish the mutually constitutive relationship between national identity and foreign policy through an analysis of the interaction of these elements in the Russian Federation under President Vladimir Putin. Russian national identity will be considered in its formation with respect to the Historical, Internal, and External 'Others' in post-Soviet discourse originally identified by the constructivist analysis of Ted Hopf, with particular emphasis on the evolution of identity narratives disseminated from the Kremlin.

Keywords: Identity, Foreign Policy, Nationalism, Russia, Vladimir Putin

## Introduction

Nina Khrushchev, a scion of the former Soviet Premier, has called Russia a “hypothetical culture,” in which the population, having been ruled by despots for centuries, is accustomed “to living in fiction rather than reality.”<sup>1</sup> Concerning a conversation with Vladimir Putin shortly after the Crimean spectacle of 2014, German Chancellor Angela Merkel struck a similar tone in remarks to Barack Obama, in which she expressed serious doubts as to whether the Russian president was completely in touch with reality, saying that he seemed to be living “in another world.”<sup>2</sup> Indeed in the course of the last two decades, Russian foreign policy and Russian politics more generally, has been eerily reminiscent of a Dostoevsky novel. A personal favorite of Mr. Putin’s, and an enduring exegete of ‘the Russian soul,’ Dostoevsky was a novelist who, some have argued, might have made a better playwright. His novels are distinctive for a number of features: meticulously cultivated suspense; exorbitant pathos and moral sentimentality; a certain coyness- almost akin to taunting or teasing- designed to hold the reader’s attention throughout protracted climaxes; static characters who are not so much realistic presentations of individuals as embodiments of abstract ideals; and excessive moralism- most notably a preference for exalted ethical dilemmas over human interest plotlines.<sup>3</sup>

Glaring stylistic parallels to Putin’s rhetoric and conduct aside, an excursus into the nuances of nineteenth century literature will strike many as out of place in any practical discussion of foreign policy; furthermore, the knowledge that Putin is known to distribute these works among Russian officials in the way of suggested reading may or may not affect this view.<sup>4</sup> However it is the overarching objective of this paper to establish, not the relevance of Dostoevsky to the Russian geopolitical outlook specifically, but the broader co-constitutive

relationship between a nation's foreign policy and the historical, cultural, and political construction of its national identity.

National identity provides the infrastructure on which a country codifies its national strategy, without which, foreign policy maneuvers are destined to be tactically ineffective and strategically futile.<sup>5</sup> In this way, national identity may be analyzed as an essential, if not always easily operational, variable in the foreign policy process.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, foreign policy is an identity-producing practice which contributes to the ongoing process of self-definition by providing "evidence of the outside world's perception and appraisal of the collectivity" as well as serving "as an instrument for realisation of the self-image through objectives determined by interests, and as a way of testing its adequacy."<sup>7</sup>

The unique historical legacy of the Soviet Empire, the nascence of the Russian Federation in its present form, and the distribution of power under the current administration all make Russia an exemplary specimen for studying this relationship. In the words of Sergei Stankevich, presidential advisor to Boris Yeltsin, "Foreign policy with us does not proceed from the directions and priorities of a developed statehood. On the contrary, the practice of our foreign policy. . . will help Russia become Russia."<sup>8</sup> This thesis will demonstrate the complex, dynamic, and mutually constitutive relationship between foreign policy and national identity through an examination of the Post-Soviet Russian state under the leadership of Vladimir Putin- with particular emphasis on the discursive developments of his third presidential term.

### **Theory, Method, Structure**

I will organize my analysis based on the framework developed by Ted Hopf in his analysis of Russian identity discourse and foreign policy in 1999. Hopf identified three

formations of the constituent Other in Post-Soviet national identity: the Historical Other, namely the Soviet Union; the Internal Other, which at the time were the Chechens; and the External Other, which for the whole of Russian history, can be none other than ‘the West.’<sup>9</sup>

I also share Hopf’s intersubjective view of reality; however, lacking the same space to provide an elaborate theoretical overview of this phenomenological approach, I will suffice to enumerate the following three tenets, common to the constructivist school of thought: First, that social and political actors are influenced as much by normative and ideational structures as material ones. Second, because the interests that drive the actions of decision makers are a product of the actors’ identities, an understanding of these identities and the non-material structures behind them is imperative. Finally, agents and structures are mutually constituted.<sup>10</sup> This final point refers to the increased reflexivity of post-traditional society, where knowledge and in particular self-knowledge, have the potential to be emancipatory: social structures are both mediums and outcomes of social action, as agents both act within structures as norms, and can consciously affect these structures through agency.

This work will be subject to the criticism common to all interpretive scholarship, namely that the theoretical approach is far better suited for retrospective analysis than it is for prognostication. I do not refute this claim in the present, in light of constructivism’s relatively recent arrival in the academic mainstream; that being said, I also contend that the contributions of constructivist scholarship are continually expanding, and will continue to do so only so long as the theoretical territory continues to be explored. The value of this paradigm as a speculative tool will no doubt be more widely recognized in time, however for the present purpose, the object of this thesis is not to present an empirical model for predicting the course of future

foreign policy, but rather to understand the variegated processes shaping a social reality which often proves far more intricate than can be accounted for within standard models.

I recognize the many limitations and shortcomings of my analysis, particularly in comparison to the expansive and in-depth treatments of the subject, such as the previously mentioned by Ted Hopf. My grasp of the Russian language is insufficient for sophisticated discourses of foreign policy and national identity with which I am dealing, and thus I will have to rely a great deal on secondary sources for translations and interpretive commentary.

### **The Historical ‘Other’ and Russian Foreign Policy**

Historical and ideological discontinuity are reoccurring preoccupations of Russian philosophy. In the words of the influential Russian thinker Pyotr Chaadaev:

Our memories go back no further than the day before; we are so to speak alien to ourselves. We proceed through time in a truly singular way, so that with each step we take forward our past experience disappears without recall ... The history of any people represents not only a sequence of facts that follow on from each other, but also a chain of ideas that are linked to each other ... This is precisely the history that we do not have.<sup>11</sup>

The expansive modernization project of the Bolshevik regime provided a temporary reprieve from this condition: not only did it impart a sense of national direction and purpose, it also furnished a common, state-sanctioned interpretation of Russia’s imperial history. With the collapse of the communist system in 1991 however, Russian society was plunged yet again into the historical and ideological vagrancy articulated by Chaadaev as a natural condition of the Russian collective consciousness.

The traumatic psycho-social impact of the USSR’s collapse on the population was exacerbated by the Yeltsin administration’s deliberate efforts to alienate Russians from their Soviet past. The official discourse of the post-Soviet decade characterized Soviet history as one



dark totalitarian singularity from 1917 to 1991: a monolithic historical tragedy, a cruel social experiment with “an anti-human economy,” which had artificially excluded Russia from its rightful place among the Western nations, and which had to be “relegated to oblivion.”<sup>12</sup> Despite his noble intentions, Yeltsin proved far more adept a demolitionist than a reconstructionist. For the vast majority of Russians, Soviet history was a complex skein which inspired variegated emotions, foremost among which were pride and geopolitical security. Yeltsin’s treatment of history was humiliating and destabilizing for many Russians, and severely impeded the formation of a new national identity. In order to recover from the degradation and loss of the post-Soviet decade, the country would require a new, dynamic leader capable not only of steering Russia towards a bold and prosperous future, but of repairing the painful rupture with the Soviet past by forging a new, ennobling image of the nation’s history.

### *The Putin Regime in Historical Context*

Putin’s Russia is a one-man show...He may listen to the counsel of his friends or not. We do not actually know. The circle is extremely narrow and difficult to penetrate, even for supposed Russian political insiders. What we do know is that there is no oligarchy or separate set of economic, business, or political interests that compete with Putin. In the end, he makes the decisions. This one-man show has deep roots in Russian political culture. A small inner circle that pivots around a single leader was the central element during long periods in both prerevolutionary czarist Russia and in the Soviet system.<sup>13</sup>

Often characterized as a hybrid regime or ‘managed democracy,’ the historical legacy of autocratic leadership is a critical variable of the foreign policy and identity producing processes in modern Russia. It legitimizes Putin’s control over not just the country’s policy decisions themselves, but the national conversation about these decisions: how they are interpreted in the context of Russian national identity. Control of the press is naturally a critical component of maintaining this monopoly.

Upon becoming the acting president of the Russian Federation, one of Vladimir Putin's first initiatives was the evisceration of Russia's independent media. He immediately established control over the country's crucial television networks, banishing the independent ownership and staff to marginal realms like sports broadcasting.<sup>14</sup> In the past decade, the Kremlin's control of the country's mass media has systematically expanded, with the intimidation and arbitrary legal prosecution of dissenting journalists at the local, regional, and federal levels becoming an increasingly ordinary practice. For most opposition journalists however, the fear of litigation pales in comparison to far more near and present dangers. Reporters without Borders has deemed Russia among the most dangerous countries in the world to engage in opposition journalism. This repression and violence has in turn led to a revival in self-censorship in Russia parallel to the norms of the Soviet Union.<sup>15</sup>

Russian émigré writer Vladimir Nabokov is credited with the maxim that no portrait of a country's leader should exist in a functioning democracy which exceeds the size of a postage stamp.<sup>16</sup> Clearly, the historical vestiges of autocracy in Russian politics preclude the country from being considered a full-fledged democracy, with the Kremlin itself coining phrases such as 'sovereign' or 'managed democracy' to describe the country's unique operation. None the less, it is impossible to ignore the sheer ubiquity of Vladimir Putin's visage in public and private spaces all across Russia, exceeding the parameters of postage across such diverse mediums as 'aestheticized' photos, paintings, tapestries, graphics, busts, bedding, and performances.<sup>17</sup> He is nearly as eminent in the cultural and private spheres of Russian life, as he is in the decision-making processes of the Russian government. The Kremlin's domination of the media and autocratic tendencies no doubt play a significant role in this phenomena; however, even given the dubious prospects for assessing true public opinion in such a regime, there can be no doubt

that Vladimir Putin also enjoys a tremendous amount of authentic popular support, which in extreme cases is even referred to as ‘Putin-mania.’ It is safe to say that a comparable level of idolatry for a leader has not been seen in Russia since the days of Joseph Stalin, which introduces another historical inheritance of the new regime: The cult of personality.

In both the Soviet and modern periods, personality cults have provided “psychological and emotional reassurance, a focus of stability and unity” during times of social, economic, and political discontent, by reinforcing “symbolic or affective attachment to the country's leaders at a time when the state could not achieve legitimacy through its policies or accomplishments.”<sup>18</sup> The relevance of these propaganda campaigns to the present discussion is two-fold: by tapping into pre-existing cultural ideals, they bolster a leader’s popularity and credibility, thus amplifying and solidifying his influence over the political discourse; additionally, these propaganda campaigns establish and reinforce an ideal-type of the national character endorsed by the state. The most notable feature of the portrait of Vladimir Putin painted by the Kremlin is hyper-masculinity, sometimes overtly sexual, often bordering on a satirical caricature of Russian machismo. Photos are frequently released of the president partaking in a variety of sports, including judo, hunting, hockey, and skiing. In August 2007, the Kremlin released a topless photo of the President fishing which sparked a media frenzy in Russia, which generated among other things, a surge in reports of Putin-inspired female hysteria, and instructional videos like “Let’s Learn Judo with Vladimir Putin,” and exercise routines premised on developing abs like those of the Russian President.<sup>19</sup>

This illuminates the fundamental difference between Putin-mania and Stalin’s cult of personality. The latter was a monolithic and static phenomenon, a homologous party-controlled image which was sustained as much by fear as by genuine admiration. The internet and the rise of a genuine consumer culture have made this sort of control more or less impossible in modern

Russia. While the Kremlin orchestrates a highly successful information campaign, Putin-mania proliferates far behind the reaches of Kremlin control. A “polysemantic, highly mobile, and easily individualized” phenomenon, Putin’s personality cult is sustained not through intimidation, but by authentic and distinctly (post)modern social processes of identification and understanding.<sup>20</sup>

Thus, through a mixture of autocratic means and personal popularity, both legitimized in Russian history, Putin is able to maintain dominance over not just the political system and foreign policy, but also the popular political discourse, to include the interpretation of Russian foreign policy, and Russian national identity. Establishing an official narrative of Russian historical identity is one important aspect of these discourses. History has always been Vladimir Putin’s favorite subject, and it serves as a conspicuous structural component of the cognitive framework through which he interprets himself and Russia. Putin perceives himself alongside the lionized rulers of Russia’s imperial and Soviet past whose portraits line the walls of his public-private spaces. For Putin, history is both personal and useful “as a policy tool, as a social and political organizing force that can help shape group identities and foster coalitions.”<sup>21</sup>

### *Historical Identity and Foreign Policy in Contemporary Russia*

It has been recently in vogue in Western media outlets to analyze Vladimir Putin’s foreign policy with reference to Russian history: Putin is commonly depicted as a contemporary tsar or an reincarnation of Josef Stalin, attempting to reestablish the Soviet Union, the tsarist empire, or sometimes both.<sup>22</sup> Faced with the growing uncertainty of Russian foreign policy, it is only natural to look to the past for explanations; however these disparate historical analyses often fail to grasp the nuances of Russian historical identity in the post-Soviet period, and tend to

overlook the complexity and dynamism of this identity, including more recent developments of the past decade.

Upon taking office, Putin immediately began the process of restoring the pride in the Soviet past, which Yeltsin's rhetoric had formerly discouraged. He restored various Soviet symbols, reinstated a lyrically modified version of the old national anthem, and most importantly, began rewriting Soviet history, so as to manufacture an unambiguous repository of Russian pride. These efforts culminated in the publication of a definitive textbook of 20<sup>th</sup> century Russian history, which has become the standard authority on the subject in classrooms across Russia. It neatly glosses over the more unsavory chapters of the Soviet history and stands to affirm Putin's bold 2005 declaration that the collapse of the Soviet Union was "the greatest geopolitical tragedy of the century."<sup>23</sup>

Putin has been wildly successful in disseminating this interpretation of history. Favorable attitudes towards the USSR have been rising at a marked rate, with even formerly controversial figures like Josef Stalin currently enjoying unprecedented popularity.<sup>24</sup> In 2016, the Pew Research Center reported that sixty-nine per cent of Russians saw the Soviet Union's collapse as a bad thing;<sup>25</sup> a similar poll taken by the Levda Center found that the number of Russians who saw this event as a positive development was only one in ten.<sup>26</sup>

Like many of those accounted for in these surveys, Vladimir Putin grew up in the golden age of the USSR. Born in 1952, shortly after the Soviet defeat of Nazi Germany, as a young man Putin bore witness to many of the Soviet Union's best years and proudest accomplishments: space exploration, the hydrogen bomb, resolve in the face of political uprisings, peace, prestige, stability.<sup>27</sup> It is only natural then, after the humiliation of decline of the 1990's, that a longing for

a mythical, golden past would emerge; and Putin can of course be counted upon to recognize the utility in harnessing such a sentiment for his political advantage.

Yet, in his own words, “we don't want the USSR back but no one believes us.”<sup>28</sup> This is something that he has emphasized repeatedly, and the same sociological surveys which report the number of Russians who miss the Soviet Union at well over fifty percent, also report that the majority of the population shares this view.<sup>29</sup> Despite high regard and sentimentality for the Soviet past, there is little contemporary enthusiasm for the restoration of the USSR as an economic, political, or geographic entity; in fact only twenty-one per cent of Russians believe that the borders of the Russian Federation should be contiguous with those of the former communist empire.<sup>30</sup>

To understand these seemingly paradoxical findings, one must look more closely at the nuances of popular discourse surrounding the Soviet Union in the past three decades.

On the one hand, Russian culture is trapped in what Serguei Oushankine has termed a nostalgic state of ‘aphasic regression’ in which ‘the major part of the population’ is ‘locked’ within the old frame of symbolic (e.g., Soviet references.) On the other hand, Russian politicians and intellectuals display a compulsion to discredit, vehemently and unequivocally, every facet of the Soviet experience... In the years since Vladimir Putin’s rise to power, this paradox has led to a perplexing practice of simultaneous regurgitation and demonization of Soviet-era mythic constructs, a practice that has become entrenched and routinized in the general cultural discourse.<sup>31</sup>

A central feature of nostalgia is “the irretrievability of the past as the very condition of desire.”<sup>32</sup>

That is to say, if the object of nostalgia were able to be recovered, it would cease to be nostalgia.

This intriguing psycho-historical complex has been developing in Russian society over time. In the 1990’s and the early 2000’s, there did indeed exist a salient lobby within the foreign policy elite which touted a vision of Russian national identity based upon the territorial boundaries of the Soviet Union. These ‘empire savers’<sup>33</sup> or ‘unionists,’<sup>34</sup> saw the Russian Federation as a direct

continuation of the USSR, and advocated an aggressive strategy to restore the geographic boundaries of Stalin's post-war union.<sup>35</sup>

The deaf ear of the Yeltsin administration as well as the gradual process of coming to terms with a painful past, referred to by the Germans as *vergangenheitsbewältigung*, did much to weaken the popular support for these ideas within Russian society. Some empire-savers do still dwell within the remote recesses of the Kremlin, still nurturing fantasies ranging “from reviving the Warsaw Pact to a more modest, but still quite mythical construct encompassing Russia and the former Soviet republics,”<sup>36</sup> however their influence is continually waning. For one, their approach is discernably masochistic, as it accentuates those features of Russia's image which other nations are bound to find most disagreeable.<sup>37</sup> Additionally, where this dwindling lobby has influenced foreign policy in the past, it has been largely unsuccessful- for example the failure of the Eurasian Economic Union. There are also rising anti-imperialist and ethno-nationalist currents within Russian society that directly oppose the ethnic plurality of the Soviet domestic and foreign policy model. For these myriad reasons, the majority of Russians, including the foreign policy elite, have conceded that the Soviet Union is irrevocably lost and should not be recreated.

Yet, even if the common trope of resurrecting the Soviet Union is acknowledged as largely outmoded in the contemporary discussion of Russian foreign policy, the vestiges of empire and super power are deeply imbedded in Russian national identity, and affect foreign policy in a number of other ways. One prominent example is concisely summarized by Emil Pain's theoretical construct of Imperial Syndrome, which has three components: (1) the imperial order, which Pain describes as the political regime of the empire, the rule over many without their input or consent; (2) the imperial body, which refers to the country's geographic territory

“divided into regions that are not culturally integrated...and that preserve historic traces of colonial conquest,” (3) and by far the most complex element, the imperial consciousness. Pain gives several examples of the imperial consciousness: “a self-understanding based on being subjects... that preserves stable statist values, hopes for ‘a wise tsar’ and ‘a firm hand’...imperial ambitions,” and geopolitical essentialism.<sup>38</sup>

This model provides an excellent example of the relationship between national identity and foreign policy. The imperial consciousness entails a willingness to make sacrifices (in the way of freedom, democracy, civil rights) for the preservation of the imperial body, and these sacrifices are necessary for the maintenance of the imperial order. Foreign policy narratives which imply threat to the imperial body, preserve the imperial order. Here is one practical example: the favored foreign policy narrative of the Putin administration, that of Western encroachment activates the imperial consciousness of the Russian population (in the form of fear, solidarity, national sentiment) which allows Putin to strengthen the imperial order by legitimizing the dismantlement of democratic institutions and the free press, and thus consolidating executive power.<sup>39</sup>

The publication of a pamphlet entitled “Russian Foreign Policy in Historical Perspective,” by the foreign minister Sergei Lavrov in 2016 testifies to the extent to which Russian historical narratives loom large over contemporary foreign policy. In the article, Lavrov’s focuses on the role which Russia has had historically and continues to have in determining the course of global developments, with particular emphasis on the tensions between the country’s existence as an independent power and its integration into European society. He asserts that Russia is “...essentially a branch of European civilization,” and that since the time of Peter the great “...not a single European issue can be resolved without Russia’s opinion.” Lavrov



At the same time, Lavrov accentuates the hostility and exclusion Russia has historically faced in the international environment. In all of its historical periods, he identifies the continuity of Russia's role in world affairs.<sup>40</sup>

It seems that in the context of the 100th anniversary of the Russian Revolution, it is important for us to understand the continuity of Russian history, which should include all of its periods without exception, and the importance of the synthesis of all the positive traditions and historical experience as the basis for making dynamic advances and upholding the rightful role of our country as a leading centre of the modern world, and a provider of the values of sustainable development, security and stability.<sup>41</sup>

Lavrov's analysis offers a compelling narrative of Russian role perception which has long been central to the discussions of Russian national identity and foreign policy. One of the key historical legacies of modern Russian identity, and one whose impacts on the realm of foreign policy are readily observable, is the abiding sense that Russia is a providential country with a unique historical mission. This idea dates back over five centuries, long before Russia became 'the fuse of the proletarian revolution' or the center of world communist power.<sup>42</sup> This notion can be traced back to the popular conceptualization of Moscow as the 'Third Rome,' and the theological inheritances of the Byzantine Empire.

Byzantium featured prominently in foreign policy and security debates in the 1990's, but only in radical right-wing intellectual circles, whose influence remained marginal. In the course of the new millennium and particularly of Putin's third term, the arguments advanced in these circles have infiltrated the mainstream media as well as mainstream Russian politics.<sup>43</sup> One radical example can be found in an appeal addressed to Prime Minister Dmitri Medvedev from the deputy of the St. Petersburg Legislative Assembly in 2016, which requested to reinstate the historical name of Istanbul on all Russian maps, teaching aids and transport directions.<sup>44</sup>

Perhaps the most important of conceptual structure inherited from the early Christian Empire is that of the Katechon. Derived from *ὁ Κατέχων*, Greek for ‘the withholding,’ Katechon refers to the force which protects the world from the advent of the Antichrist and the associated chaos in Christian mythology.

[T]he Greek and Roman idea of internal structure, an inner order of the inhabited world was transformed on Russian soil into the idea of defense from the external enemy. Russia sees itself not so much as an empire that holds the power of chaos beyond the borders of the world by its inner order, but rather as a military force that resists a metaphysical enemy, sent by the Antichrist. This metaphysical enemy takes different shapes in different historical periods: the Tatars, the Turks, freemasons, Napoleon, Hitler, and nowadays American agents, Ukrainian fascists, and the Kiev junta.<sup>45</sup>

The essence of this concept is summarized aptly by Russian conservative thinker Egor Kholmogorov: “Russians always ‘defend,’ even when it might seem that they attack.”<sup>46</sup> This Katechonic discourse has come intermittently to the fore in Russian policy historically, and is once again featuring prominently Russian foreign policy and national identity discourse. The emphasis on Russia’s responsibility for the fate of the world as an isolating burden<sup>47</sup> is supported by the historical narrative of Russia’s role in the Second World War, or as it is called in Russia, the Great Patriotic War. This event continues to be an enormous source of Russian pride, and features prominently in the discourses surrounding Russia’s rightful place in Western history and world politics- particularly her role as a Katechonic protector of European civilization. This perception also contributes to Russia’s dearth of formal alliances, and “reluctance to join international bodies except as an exceptional or dominant member.”<sup>48</sup>

In times of open conflict, the mobilizing potential of the spiritual rhetoric becomes even more apparent. The idea of Russia as Katechon has provided ideational basis for Russia’s actions in the Ukrainian conflict, including the new wave of militarization and anti-Western sentiment,<sup>49</sup>

and the resultant sanctions and information war fit neatly into the Katechonic argument of progressing anomia in the West.<sup>50</sup>

In summary, while assertions that Vladimir Putin seeks to re-establish the Soviet Union are improvident and romantic, the residuum of empire are none the less palpable in contemporary foreign policy. The timeless Russian tradition of autocratic leadership legitimizes the practices of the Putin administration which would be inadmissible in any other functioning democracy. The regime's authority is also sustained by the deep personalism of Russian intellectualism and politics, historically manifest in cults of personality, which is both operationalized by the Kremlin and reproduced authentically in the Russian population. These historical vestiges, together with the 'Imperial Syndrome,' uphold the schema of power in the Russian political system which directs both domestic and foreign policy. Additionally, the circuitous psycho-historical legacy of the Soviet Union as well as the conceptual inheritances of the Byzantine Empire continue to impact Russian foreign policy thinking in complex ways which are rarely accounted for by the simplistic tropes which plague historical analysis of Russian foreign policy.

### **The Internal 'Other' and Russian Foreign Policy**

The English phrase "the Russian people" may be translated into Russian in either of two ways: as '*rossiiskii narod*,' which emphasizes civic membership to the broad, multiethnic community of the Russian Federation, or as '*russkii narod*,' which refers specifically to an ethnic or cultural idea of Russianness. Throughout the first and second post-Soviet decades, *rossiiskii* held uncontested dominion over all political and legal matters in the realm of official discourse; in Putin's third term however, the boundary between civic and ethnic nationalism has become increasingly blurred, as rising tides of ethnic nationalism have begun to challenge the statist core

of Putin's ideology. In order to understand the impact of these tensions on Russian foreign policy, it is necessary to situate the debate briefly within the historical context of Russian nationalism.

*The Evolution of Russian Nationalism*

...[I]f our nationalism has 'dawned' as they keep repeating in the papers—it's still at school, at some German 'Peterschule,' sitting over a German book and repeating its everlasting German lesson... But nothing has happened and nothing of the kind has dawned and everything is going on in the old way, that is, as ordained by God... Nationalism, if you like, has never existed among us except as a distraction for gentlemen's clubs, and Moscow ones at that.<sup>51</sup>

Unlike the colonial powers of Europe, the idea of Russia as a nation in the modern sense had not taken hold in the country prior to its period of imperial expansion. In addition, unlike European rulers, the tsars' colonial conquests bordered their own territories, creating an admixture of Russians and non-Russians which would only compound the ambiguity of Russian national identity.<sup>52</sup> In pre-Petrine Russia, there existed collective identity as members of the Orthodox Church, and later as subjects of the tsar; however no widespread secular identification with land or polity would begin to germinate until the reign of Peter the Great. Though Peter the Great is frequently cited as the harbinger of the modern Russian identity, the propaganda campaigns launched by his men to justify his imperial policies only further obscured a distinct definition of ethnic or national Russianness: they characterized the empire's expansion as a "gathering of indigenous lands," and lauded the enormity of the Russian state without differentiating between the Russian and non-Russian areas.<sup>53</sup>

The Slavophile movement of the 1800's distinguished this period as the golden age of Russian nationalism, despite the fact that the class divisions within society occluded the emergence of genuine ethnic nationalism. Additionally, the civic notion of nationalism which

had made its way to Russia through European intellectual circles was viewed particularly by Slavophiles as a foreign import and thus totally inapplicable in Russia.<sup>54</sup> The Slavophile model of national identity was built around a romanticized archetype of the Russian peasant, and emphasized devout Orthodoxy, communality, and salt of the earth morality as essential features of the Russian national character. Towards the end of the century, ethnic undertones began to emerge from the Slavophile movement,<sup>55</sup> most notably the outgrowth of the Black Hundreds movement, a vehemently anti-semitic organization of extreme Russian nationalists. Yet, these sentiments never successfully took hold of the population on a large scale. While the nationalist movements which were becoming popular around this time in Europe were co-opted by imperial regimes as a means of consolidating popular support around traditional national symbols and preserving the existing order against the threat of Revolution, the Russian tsars remained fairly skeptical of nationalism, and failed to appropriate its imagery to their own advantage. The early Russian socialists, on the other hand, capitalized on this wealth of populist sentiment where the old regime had failed, and incorporated symbolic components of Slavophile nationalism into their revolutionary movement to unseat the tsars.<sup>56</sup>

Under the Bolsheviks however, Russian nationalism was even more strictly suppressed. While other nationalities were encouraged as an essential element of the regime's anti-imperialist image, Russian nationalism, the nationalism of the ethnic majority, was proscribed for this very reason. Indigenous cultures were nurtured by the early central party leadership in the form native language schools, theaters, and similar institutions aimed at cultural preservation. By permitting and even encouraging peoples to keep the native cultural, linguistic, and even religious traditions to which they felt primordially attached, they anticipated gaining support against the Whites in the Civil War in the short run, and in the long run, de-politicizing national identity and

discouraging nationalist uprisings. If loyalty to the Soviet State was seen as compatible with the one's most valued identities, minority groups would be more amenable to Soviet rule and eventually the internationalist ideology of socialism.<sup>57</sup>

But the Bolsheviks did not conceive of the RSFSR as an “embryonic national homeland” for Russians, as the other republics were seen for their respective ethnicities.<sup>58</sup> Russian culture was in fact the most heavily policed for signs of nationalist ideology. Russian authors, thinkers, and public figures whose intellectual emissions did not complement Bolshevik dogma were defamed and in some cases stricken from publication.<sup>59</sup> While all religious institutions suffered at the hands of the atheist state, particularly under the violent campaigns of Stalin, in comparison to the Russian Orthodox Church, Muslim and other Christian denominations fared relatively well in the early years of the regime. At one point, in order to promote Socialist values in Muslim regions, passages of the Qu’ran interpreted as congenial to Bolshevism were even co-opted for use in state propaganda in the Muslim republics. While the Orthodox Church would endure a brief period of respite and similar co-option under Stalin as a means of bolstering the war effort, it was otherwise inordinately targeted by the regime. From 1920 to 1941, the number of Orthodox priests in Russia fell from 60,000 to 5,665 as a result of emigration, fear, and mass execution.<sup>60</sup>

For most of Soviet history, the RSFSR had neither its own Academy of Sciences or its own Communist party, so the central institutions of the Union at large served as the Russian institutions as well. While intended in part to offset Russian nationalist sentiment, the fact that ethnic Russians still dominated the all-union institutions meant that the other Republics still viewed Russians as politically privileged- a perception that was justified by various internal realities. Nonetheless, the lack of institutions explicitly “Russian” did promote Russian

identification with the entirety of Soviet space, and thus amplified the perception of loss for ethnic Russians upon the Soviet Union's collapse.<sup>61</sup>

When the USSR dissolved in 1991, the ethnic homogeneity of the Russian population rose by thirty-one percent. Many felt that Russia would finally have the opportunity to develop into a modern nation-state, based on a high degree of cultural affinity. Yet, the Yeltsin administration was careful to present the new national idea in non-ethnic terms, introducing the civic words for Russian identity, 'rossiiskii' and 'rossiiane,' into the state discourse. Today however, this non-ethnic terminology has fallen out of fashion, both colloquially and officially, along with shock therapy, oligarchy, and other artifacts of the unsuccessful reorientation towards Western liberalism.<sup>62</sup>

#### *Russian Nationalism and Foreign Policy under Vladimir Putin*

Throughout his first tenure as president, contrary to the early characterizations in the Western media, Vladimir Putin avoided making nationalism a central element of his popular appeal.<sup>63</sup> In rare consensus with his predecessor Boris Yeltsin, Putin was always careful to reference the Russian people as a civically constituted collectivity, 'rossiiskii narod,' in order to avoid alienating ethnic minorities in the Russian nation building project.<sup>64</sup> Putin faithfully espoused a civic or statist identity model which residency within the borders of the Russian Federation, regardless of ethnic identity, is the sole prerequisite of Russianness. His national identity model underscores ethnic plurality as a defining feature of the Russian population, and emphasizes that this fact is corroborated by the whole of the country's history. In his own words, "since ancient times, the idea of a shared community— shared by people of different nationalities and faiths — has constituted the foundation for the spiritual outlook of the Russian people."<sup>65</sup>

Putin's commitment to statism in practice can be observed throughout the Second Chechen War. After the apartment bombings of 1999, when over half the Russian population was ready to grant Chechen independence and sixty-four percent supported the idea of deporting all Chechens from Russia, Putin resisted mobilizing ethnic nationalism in support of his policies. Instead, the picture he painted in official discourse carefully characterized Chechen otherness as a matter of criminality, not the more accessible prejudices of religion, ethnicity, or nationality. Several journalists were even impugned on charges of "inciting racial hatred" for their reporting on the Chechen conflict.<sup>66</sup>

Putin did not frame his actions on Chechnya as being about nationalism...Instead, they were portrayed as an operation against 'terrorism' and 'bandit formations.' Chechens as a nation were not blamed by Putin, just the specific perpetrators and the corrupt or incompetent leadership in the republic that enabled or supported them, and he was always careful not to exclude Chechens from the Russian nation in his rhetoric.<sup>67</sup>

Despite Putin's commitment to a civic, ethnically inclusive model of national identity, ethnonationalism and xenophobic attitudes have been on the rise in Russia, more or less continuously, since the fall of the USSR. Not only had this event resulted in a more ethnically homogenous population, it also precipitated a demographic crisis, which in turn generated a great demand for migrant workers. These foreigners were generally low or unskilled laborers from the former Soviet republics, with little or no education.<sup>68</sup> While there had certainly been a great deal of migration under the communist system, the cultural homogeneity imposed by the common Soviet education has since evaporated, meaning that the immigrant workforce in Russia today, much of which lack the official permit required to work legally in the Russian Federation, constitutes something of "a poorly integrated Lumpenproletariat."<sup>69</sup>

Thus, as unemployment rose in the Caucasus and Central Asian countries, and the oil-driven Russian economy continued to demand more foreign labor for sustenance, migrantphobia



and racism proliferated rapidly. Beginning in the mid-2000's, it became increasingly clear that a new form of nationalism very different from the nostalgia of the 90's was taking hold. This new movement, built on aggressive racism of the neo-Nazi and skinhead movements, championed the idea of "a new, ethnically pure (or, at the very least, ethnically hierarchical) Russia."<sup>70</sup> These sentiments have become the core of right-wing nationalist mobilization in the country, gaining momentum over the past two decades.<sup>71</sup>

While abiding by the rhetoric of civic patriotism, the Kremlin nonetheless began to recognize the political potential in harnessing these nationalist attitudes early on. Particularly throughout the first decade of the new millennium, the Kremlin frequently encouraged the operations of more moderate nationalist organizations, and at times even condoned explicitly radical strains of ethnonationalism- such as the skin-heads and neo-Nazis who organize the annual right-wing gathering known as the 'Russian March.'<sup>72</sup>

The repercussions of this complicity became clear in 2008 when, for the first time, right-wing nationalist currents spilled-over from the domestic realm, into the realm of foreign policy.<sup>73</sup> During the buildup to the Russo-Georgian conflict, the model of 'civilizational nationalism' debuted in official foreign policy discourse. This configuration of Russian identity, while not explicitly ethnic, emphasized Russia's obligations to "compatriots" abroad, whose membership to the Russian community was clearly based on something other than citizenship or residency.<sup>74</sup> The progressive intermixing of official and nationalist postures "created a self-fulfilling prophecy—from the Russian perspective, Georgia was the hostile, nationalist 'aggressor' against whom measures had to be taken."<sup>75</sup>

2008 was also the year that racially motivated violence reached its peak in Russia. Right wing ethnonationalist groups were carrying out raids and pogroms in immigrant communities,

and a number of racially charged demonstrations and riots were occurring across Russia, often taking place at sporting events. The leaders in Moscow could no longer deny the dangerous game they were engaging in by stoking the flames of radical nationalism; realizing that with the potential to draw upon the abeyant anti-immigrant prejudices burgeoning in the general population, these groups posed an imminent threat to the administration's objectives, the authorities began to crack down on the un-sanctioned activities of the radical nationalists. In 2011, the Movement against Illegal Immigration, one of the most popular ethnonationalist organizations in Russia, was even banned for extremism. The Kremlin was clearly attempting to "force the genie back in the bottle."<sup>76</sup>

Many of these ardent nationalists, already contemptuous of the regime for their pro-immigration policies and the billions of dollars in aid and investment expended to the North Caucasus, were driven from the Kremlin's embrace straight into the arms of the predominantly liberal anti-Putin opposition. This was apparent from the discordant assortment of leftist, rightist, and centrist banners which appeared in the anti-regime protests of 2011, in which pro-democracy liberals marched side by side with obstreperous ethnonationalists.<sup>77</sup>

Thus, when Putin returned to office in 2012 after four years of indirect rulership under the auspices of Dmitri Medvedev's subordinate, diverse swaths of the population were feeling alienated and hostile toward the government, and Putin's personal approval ratings were at an all-time low. No doubt concluding that the support of the pro-Western democrats was irredeemably lost, Putin's solution was to adopt a protrusive conservative-values agenda to re-solidify support among the center right of his constituency.<sup>78</sup> This initiative involved a discursive shift back towards civilizational nationalism, which grew exponentially more pronounced in 2014. An especially conspicuous element of this discursive shift is the elimination of the civic

*rossiiane* terminology from official discourse. Once an indicator of the state's commitment to a statist national identity, this word has been markedly absent from the major addresses of Putin's third term.<sup>79</sup> Nowhere was this absence imbued with more significance than in March 2014, when during an address to a joint session of the Russian parliament, Putin, for the first time, began substituting the ethnic 'russkie' for its civic rival, in the explicitly political context of the Crimea's annexation. Crimea had become 'a primordial *russkaia* land,' and Sevastopol and Kyiv were now '*russkie* cities.'<sup>80</sup>

The annexation of Crimea was legitimized not only historically as having been once part of the Russian Empire, but also as an ethnic Russian land.<sup>81</sup> Analysts interpreted this monumental shift as evidence of the administration's long speculated realignment towards an ethnocentric national identity, and an aggressively nationalist foreign policy agenda. Certainly, this speech was a watershed in the evolution of official state discourse, and the annexation of Crimea itself, an affirmation of a far more important transition from the regime's traditionally pragmatic, unideological approach to foreign policy, toward a new, hyper-ideological agenda. However, the common characterization of this development as a rejection of the longstanding statist model of national identity in favor of its ethnic alternative is a misinterpretation which fails to account for important rhetorical nuances of Putin's new model of civilizational nationalism, with direct implications for Russia's foreign policy.

As Marlene Laruelle argues, a genuine nationalist reorientation in foreign policy would have entailed a much more ambitious strategy in Eastern Ukraine than that which was ultimately decided upon; Russia would have reasonably been expected to annex the Donbas territory, rather than "...allowing it to become a secessionist region that made Putin look like a weak leader incapable of advancing the Russian nationalist cause."<sup>82</sup> Furthermore, in 2013, research

conducted at Moscow's Higher School of Economics revealed that seventy-percent of Russians view people of other ethnicities negatively, with one in five reported to believe that these people have no place in Russia at all.<sup>83</sup> If Putin were truly committed to conceding this version of Russian identity, his continued advocacy for Eurasian integration and the free movement of labor migrants would be inexplicable.<sup>84</sup>

It is therefore far more likely that Putin's switch to *russkii*, while rhetorically significant, was more a reflection of a change already manifest in mainstream discourse than a genuine nod to ethnonationalist on the part of the administration.<sup>85</sup> Putin's real strategic objective is not to enliven an ethnic interpretation of Russian national identity, which would directly conflict with his many of his state policies, but to continue to blur the line between ethnic and civic identities, so as to create a wider margin of plausibility for his offensive-defensive expansionist agenda. For this reason, the emphasis of his civilizational discursive formation is not ethnic identity, but the far more fluid and ambiguous construct of Russian culture (*russkaya kultura*). Russian civilization is thus comprised of the Russian state, together with all those who identify with Russian culture.<sup>86</sup>

This nuance is plainly demonstrated in the discursive formations of 'Russian compatriots' and the 'Russian World,' which are frequently used to justify the annexation of Crimea. The depiction of Vladimir Putin as "a guarantor of security for the 'Russian World,'"<sup>87</sup> reflects "a fundamental change in official interpretations of the Kremlin's zone of responsibility in questions of security; we see a shift from security at the nation-state level to security at the level of a vague community larger than the nation-state."<sup>88</sup> By keeping borders rhetorically vague, the conceptive formation of the 'Russian World' both stimulates and justifies Moscow's foreign policy, with precarious implications for regional security.<sup>89</sup>

In summary, the conceptual shift to *russskie* towards more exclusive political rhetoric is not a reflection of any real ideological change or concessions within the Kremlin; it is an operational device intended to (1) reconcile two opposed domestic ideological camps under an official narrative by providing a middle ground which might be viewed as concessionary by both sides, (2) to justify otherwise arbitrary and illegal expansion and intervention in foreign policy, and (3) to mobilize a much broader swath of the population in support of this foreign policy.

[A] civic rossiiiane identity linked to the Russian state could not so easily be mobilised to legitimise expansionist adventures in Ukraine. When identity now was re-cast in ethnocultural terms, however, the Kremlin could appeal not only to the will of the Crimean population as expressed in the recent referendum, but also to the unacceptable separation of ethnic kin. The incorporation of Crimea and Sevastopol into the Federation thus served to rally both Russian ethnonationalists and...the adherents of the restoration of a Russian/Soviet Empire under Putin's banner.<sup>90</sup>

The astuteness of the Kremlin's calculation is evidenced by the massive popularity of Crimea's annexation across vast and diverse swaths of the Russian population. A recent survey found that Russians are prouder of Putin's reclamation of Crimea than of Gagarin's space conquest.<sup>91</sup> Even ethnic minority groups, who would reasonably be expected to oppose an expansionist foreign policy in Moscow, generally maintain a favorable view of this event.<sup>92</sup> While this enthusiasm can be partially accounted for by the *russskie* nature of the annexation, there is another even more important element of the annexation's popular appeal, which solidifies the civilizational reading of Russian identity and provides a crucial supply of populist imagery for the Kremlin in mobilizing support for its foreign policy: the formation of Russian identity and foreign policy as a response to the antagonism of 'the West.'

### **The External 'Other': The West in Russian Identity and Foreign Policy**

Embodied by the 19<sup>th</sup> century intellectual debates between the Westernizers and the Slavophiles, the discussion of Russian identity has always been framed by ideological construction of ‘East’ and ‘West.’ The traditional Westernizing camp of Russian thought believed that the way forward for Russia was to modernize and emulate European institutions and culture. For Westernizers, “the West” was a symbol of enlightenment, progress, democracy, and civilization, while “the East” was a symbol of authoritarianism, barbarism, intellectual and cultural primitivity, and superstition. Their antipodes, the Slavophiles held the inverse view. The Slavophiles equated “the West” with moral decay, imperial exploitation, American hegemony, materialism, and artificiality. They idealized the peasant as a bastion of Russian virtue, and felt that Russia’s unique national destiny lay in eschewing Western influences, and actualizing the eastern, Slavic values in her political and cultural systems.<sup>93</sup>

Despite the conflation of Slavophiles with ‘the East,’ throughout all Russian history and across all prominent strains of Russian thinking, Europe has always been the primary referent of Russian national identity, never Asia. The West has always served as the primary constituent ‘Other’ in Russian national identity formation, the lens through which the Russian intellectual elite interpreted their country’s place in the world, and the yardstick by which they measured its accomplishments. In its present form, this debate has evolved from the historically perpetuated binary framework- “the West or the rest”- to a trinary one: Russia may choose to relinquish her European identity entirely, to identify as a European country following the Western path of development, or to identify as a European country following a non-Western path of development.<sup>94</sup>

*Russia’s Relations with the West in Historical Context*

In 1985 Mikhail Gorbachev became the eighth and final leader of the Soviet Union. After decades of fierce antagonism with the West, Gorbachev was the first to earnestly pursue rapprochement in foreign policy, as well as Westernizing reforms within Russia domestically. In 1986, he used the phrase ‘new world order’ to describe his vision of the post-Cold War world, in which Russia would work together with its former adversaries in the West to ensure peace, prosperity, and security.

Reform-minded members of the Soviet government were looking for ways to break the Cold War gridlock, imagining some sort of ‘a joint venture’ between the two opponents as a solution. In other words, they saw ‘a new world order’ as some agreement on mutually acceptable rules of global governance, as a compromise worked out through equal rapprochement.<sup>95</sup>

In the spirit of this new cordiality, Gorbachev agreed to let a united Germany join the NATO alliance, in return for the promise that NATO would not expand “one inch to the East,” thus allowing Russia to maintain a minimum sphere of security. Given that Germany had tried to destroy Russia twice in the past century alone, allowing Germany to enter into a military alliance, hostile to Russia and lead by another historic enemy and the greatest military power in history, was a truly remarkable gesture. The United States naturally agreed to the terms of this agreement; however, in just a few short years the United States would default on its end of the bargain. Setting a precedent which would be upheld throughout the next three decades of US-Russian relations, the subsequent eastward expansion of NATO under the Clinton administration violated the terms of the agreement with Gorbachev and showed a complete lack of consideration for Russia’s national interest.<sup>96</sup>

Even still, the Western reorientation that began with Gorbachev continued and expanded in the first years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, under Boris Yeltsin’s presidential

administration. Construction of the post-communist Russian economic and political system continued based on the models and recommendations put forward by the Kremlin's Western advisors. The new constitution of the Russian Federation evinced the principles of Western democracy, drawing inspiration directly from the national charters of European countries.<sup>97</sup> Yeltsin also pushed for integration into the international system, joining influential decision-making bodies such as the G8.<sup>98</sup> Warm relations with the West and particularly the United States were made a priority; Yeltsin even commonly referred to the U.S. president as his "friend Bill."<sup>99</sup>

This did not dissuade Yeltsin's "friend Bill," from continuing NATO expansion. Protests from the Kremlin were met with the response that the agreement between Gorbachev and the Bush administration had been only verbal, and thus not binding. Russia's diplomatic generosity was immediately met with utter disregard for its security interests by the powers of the West. As the Russians saw it, the dominant attitude of the United States was, and would continue to be, that of military and geopolitical entitlement: America could draw its 'red line' right up to the Russian border without having to so much as acknowledge the clear threat and encroachment on Russian national security;<sup>100</sup> however any subsequent measures taken by Moscow to bolster its own security in response to such a flagrant arrogation would be interpreted by Washington as aggression.

Despite assurances to Russia that NATO was merely a defensive alliance, this expansion was immediately followed by the bombing of Serbia in 1999. Russia was now forced to confront the discrepancy between the 'new world order' envisioned by Gorbachev and optimistic reformers, and the 'new world order' envisioned by the West- which from the Russian perspective, did not appear to be a new world order at all, but simply the emboldened continuation of American hegemony.<sup>101</sup> In the West the fall of the Soviet Union was interpreted



as an ideological victory; the losing party was thus expected to quietly conform to political expectations of the victors, and to accept a vastly diminished role in the new international order.

In Russia, the bombing of Serbia had been preceded by the 1998 ruble crash, and the Russian government was forced to default on its foreign debt. The Western economic reforms had failed to bring about the widespread prosperity that Russians had anticipated, and Russia's geopolitical munificence had only been met with disdain and disinterest by Western powers. Russians felt robbed, humiliated, and embittered; it seemed that the "uninformed infatuation" with the West was over.<sup>102</sup>

#### *Vladimir Putin and the West*

Russian hopes for equal dialogue with the West had failed to come true, and Western reforms had only compounded this disillusionment. Despite both insult and injury, the early years of the Putin presidency were characterized by the same political and economic aspirations which had dominated the former administration, before they were snubbed by the West, and the cycle was unsurprisingly repeated. The Kremlin remained hopeful that as Russia's position improved, the Western powers would feel compelled to approach dialogue with Russia on equal terms, and that they would be able to reach the satisfactory agreements through mutual concessions. This optimism was particularly pronounced after the 9-11 terrorist attacks, when it was perceived that the common enemy of radical Islamic terrorism could strengthen Russia-U.S. relations. Following the attacks President Putin was the first world leader to express his sympathy to President Bush, and in the course of this phone call, Putin made several amicable concessions in the spirit of unity against a common enemy.<sup>103</sup>

Putin's experience was the same as Yeltsin and Gorbachev before him. No sooner had these diplomatic gestures been made, then the United States resumed the policy of slighting Russian interests. This phone call was followed shortly thereafter by the second major wave of NATO expansion, and what's more, the unilateral withdrawal of the United States from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty which Russia viewed as an important part of its national security.<sup>104</sup>

This pattern was also repeated in the sphere of global economics during the early years of Putin's presidency. Despite the low-opinion towards Western economic integration, Putin attempted to integrate with the European Union. Moscow perceived that the institutional and regulatory practices of the EU would help Russia to acquire new technologies, and stabilize and expand its economy.<sup>105</sup> This was a sound idea, that likely would have resulted in economic benefits for both parties, however Russia found the EU to be less than accommodating. The integration model proposed by the EU commission president "...would have meant that Russia would adopt all the rules and regulations but would not be able to influence their development."<sup>106</sup>

In 2008, following the Russian incursion into Georgia, tensions between Russia and the West reached another low. This was followed by an attempt at a "reset" in US-Russian relations under President Obama in 2009, the highpoint of which was very possibly U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's symbolic gifting of a toy red button that was supposed to be inscribed with the Russian word for "reset," to Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov- but due to a translation error, the button actually said "overcharged."<sup>107</sup> In 2011, after promising Russia that the United States would not intervene in Libya if Russia approved a no-fly zone over Libya in the UN Security Council, the United States interceded in the conflict, unseating Muammar Gaddafi, and antagonizing Moscow.<sup>108</sup>

Thus, from the Russian perspective, the post-Soviet history of Russian-Western relations has been defined by a pattern in which Russia seeks the geopolitical recognition it feels it deserves, and the blasé Western powers continually snub what they perceive as merely a “regional power.” In the context of identity formation, necessarily a central concern of the post-Soviet period, this relationship bears uncanny resemblance to Hegel’s Master-Slave dialectic. Hegel identifies what he calls a “life and death struggle” for recognition, in which the disadvantaged party seeks to establish its identity vis-à-vis the Other, through the validation of the Other’s acknowledgment. Inequality is an important element of this process, due to the mutually opposed nature of otherness and consciousness of the self.<sup>109</sup>

In a fascinating psychoanalytic analysis, Artemy Magus takes this recognition theory a step further, asserting that this process of identity formation in Russo-Western relations has produced a governing psycho-social matrix analogous to the clinical condition of Hysteria, the symptoms of which are manifest in Russian foreign policy- particularly in Ukraine, where Russia’s antics include elements of mimicry and provocation. In the psychoanalytic literature, hysteria afflicts subjects with particularly weak and empty Egos, whose sense of identity is entirely dependent on a constituent Other. This Other, the sole reference point for hysteric, is inevitably aloof, enigmatic, and disinterested. It is the resultant “interplay of identification, desire, and power asymmetry” that breeds the structural phenomenon of hysteria.<sup>110</sup>

Fear of embarrassment and desire for honor are fairly basic motivations for states’ decisions and the choices they make in explaining these decisions to both domestic and international audiences. Kremlin officials have explicitly characterized their foreign policies in Ukraine and Syria in terms of self-affirmation- establishing Russia’s might and dignity on the world stage after decades of humiliation. What distinguishes hysteria is the contradictory

feelings and impulses which plague this desire for recognition: for Russia, the West is at once the standard to be aspired to, the gatekeeper of international acceptance and prestige, as well as a hypocrite and a cheat, the chief impediment of Russia's return to its rightful status. In trying to identify and appease the 'civilized West,' Russia has committed itself to the rules of the international system, made by the U.S.- only to watch the Western nations break these same rules. For decades the United States has been violating the sovereignty of weaker nations, unseating governments and propping up regimes which compliment its own interests. Then there is of course, the "era's most extreme international crime," the invasion of Iraq,<sup>111</sup> which despite its glaring illegality, provoked no serious repercussions from the international community. Yet when Russia commits similar crimes, international censure is swift, and often followed by crippling sanctions.

Mimicry and histrionic behavior are common symptoms of hysteria, as well as Russian foreign policy and foreign policy rhetoric, and it is common for the hysteric to assume multiple roles in the same script. Hysteria is a phenomenon that allows for self-affirmation and the rebuke of authority, while at the same time preserving one's subaltern position. It is imperative to the Kremlin's narrative of international events that Russia be perceived as the victim of Western hypocrisy and aggression. Thus, even as Russia seeks recognition, it also engages in provocative behavior which allow for the reproduction of an identity based on being the "under-recognized loser of world politics."<sup>112</sup> For example the annexation of Crimea, while sold to the Russian's as an assertion of Russian might and dignity in the global arena, actually weakened Russia's reputation globally. The unconscious nature of this complex also results in the non-recognition of one's own aggressive behavior, and even the projection of this very behavior onto the Other. This pattern can be clearly discerned in the Kremlin's narrative of the Ukrainian crisis, in which

its own involvement is routinely denied and minimized, and the blame for the conflict is projected on the West at every possible juncture.<sup>113</sup> Moscow's recent interference in U.S. and European elections might also be interpreted as an extension of this feature, as Russia adamantly denies its involvement, and routinely shifts the focus to Western meddling in the democratic affairs of other countries.

The civilization discourse of Russian national identity which has emerged in the course of Putin's third term is a convenient tool in navigating the failed quest for recognition by the West. One of its central discursive features is the depiction of a world which contains multiple civilizations, equal, but necessarily suited for different paths of development and thus, to different standards of measurement. Within this paradigm, the Western criticism and refusal to grant Russia 'a seat at the table' of civilized world powers can be attributed not to a failure on Russia's part to conform to universal standards which is a degrading conclusion, but to the existence of multiple models of civilization, which while widely divergent, are no less reputable. In the realm of foreign policy, this works not only to favorably explain Russia's past humiliations, but to justify any and all actions which are excoriated by the Western community.

A discourse of 'liberal vs. conservative' values has been co-opted by the Russian regime as a means of simplifying this multi-civilizational configuration of world politics. Depictions of Russia as a 'anti-liberal European civilization' or one of multiple 'pillars of European civilization'<sup>114</sup> allow Russia to retain its natural cultural and historical affinity with Europe, while holding itself to a different set of standards through the essentialization of 'differences' around specific issues- namely, issues of democracy and human rights. Not only does this allow the Putin regime to excuse itself from international censure, it also provides an ideological basis for its response to domestic calls for democratic reform.<sup>115</sup>

## Conclusion

The issue of Russian identity has been a central preoccupation of the Russian literary and philosophical traditions, beginning at least with the writings of Pytor Chaadaev in the 1830s. Chaadaev characterized the primary conflict of Russian national identity as one between the “two great principles of intelligent nature-imagination and reason.”<sup>116</sup> A pioneer of Westernizing thought, he associated the latter and for him more desirable principle with Western influence, with membership to the universal history of mankind, and with the rejection of prideful nationalist notions of ‘a special path’ for Russian politics in favor of engaging fully with the global community. In his *Apologie d'un fou*, he writes, “Love of one's country is a fine thing, but there is something even finer and that is love of the truth.”<sup>117</sup> The tensions explored in Chaadaev's writings on Russian national identity- tensions between pride and humility, east and west, continuity and discontinuity, different approaches to truth- are as relevant today as they were in the early nineteenth century.<sup>118</sup>

In the post-Soviet period, the construction of Russian national identity has taken place with reference to historical, internal, and external conceptualizations of the constituent ‘Other.’ None of these matrixes are self-contained; in fact, they frequently overlap- oftentimes at the thematic intersections posed by Chaadaev. For instance, the discussion of Russia's relations to the West can hardly be undertaken without mention of Russia's connection to its primary historical ‘Other,’ the Soviet Union, and in this discussion, the paradigms of pride and humility, continuity and discontinuity, and conflicting truths are almost palpable. In addition to being interwoven, these three formations of Russian national identity also require more penetrating inquiry than the cursory glance they are frequently afforded in foreign policy op-eds. As Winston Churchill famously said, “Russia is a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma,” and so it

is only fitting that each of these three identity formations abound in nuance and paradox which should not be overlooked in their implications for either Russian national identity, or Russian foreign policy.

A prominent example of this is the frequent assertion that Vladimir Putin's foreign policy is rooted in nostalgia for the former Soviet Union, and is aimed at resurrecting the fallen communist giant. Not only are such claims much too fanciful and unqualified to be considered practical, they fail to account for the very nature of nostalgia, and the complexity and ambivalence of the relationship between modern Russia and the Soviet Union. Furthermore, the tendency to characterize Vladimir Putin's foreign policy as "nationalist," fails to address what is, in the Russian context, an extremely multifaceted abstraction. The inspired nationalists in Russian domestic politics, for instance, are vituperative racists who believe that the nation is ethnically constituted. The typology of Russian nationalisms contains both statist and ethnic integrals, with orientations towards various definitions of both the Russian 'core' and the former empire.<sup>119</sup> Without examining the specific ideational components of Putin's national model, the characterization of his foreign policy as "nationalist" is more or less meaningless. Lastly, it is hardly necessary to emphasize the grave bias indulged in by any analysis of Russo-Western relations in which a single victim and a single aggressor are readily apparent: the history itself is far more complex, and the social reality polysemous.

The historical 'Other' in Russian national identity has furnished many structural and ideological inheritances which impact foreign policy. Centuries of autocratic rulership validates what would be unthinkable in any other democratic society, and the deep personalism of Russian political culture which has given the world its conception of the cult of personality, works to preserve this power structure in Russian society. This, taken together with the dynamic embodied

in theoretical construct of ‘Imperial Syndrome,’ reinforce the narratives which sustain both foreign and domestic Russian policy. Additionally, psycho-historical baggage from the communist era as well as ideological inheritances of the Byzantine Empire continue to influence the thinking of Russian foreign policy makers in intricate ways.

The internal ‘Other’ in Russian national identity has been a vague construct historically, and is today a byproduct not only of unique approaches to indigenous and imperial policy in both tsarist and communist Russia, but the recent pressures of globalization, as well as deliberate attempts by the administration to obscure the criteria for nationality. Vladimir Putin is not what would be considered an ardent nationalist in Russian society, however he has proven highly adept at operationalizing nationalist sentiments in support of his foreign policy. Particularly throughout his third term as president, Putin has also instated a new model of Russian identity which by blurring the lines between ethnic and civic definitions of nationality, proves both amenable to both the trends and conflicts in popular discourse, and easily manipulated to suit his foreign policy objectives. This civilizational model of Russian nationalism unites customarily opposed ideological camps behind a common qualification for Russianness, which is in essence, whatever Vladimir Putin says it is. This keeps territorial boundaries in the Russian sphere plausibly in flux, and allows Putin to decide who belongs to the Russian state and who abroad merits its military ‘protection.’ The abstractions of ‘compatriots’ and the ‘Russian world’ legitimate Russia’s involvement in regional affairs on vague and mutable ‘civilizational’ grounds.<sup>120</sup>

The external ‘Other,’ the West, has also played an integral part in the formation of this civilizational identity discourse, and continues to feature prominently in its reproduction. The disparity of power and patterned humiliation experienced by Russia in its interactions with



Western powers have given rise to an identity complex which some would describe as hysterical. This psycho-cultural matrix has led Russia to seek out a new means of self-affirmation apart from the long-pursued recognition of Western powers, by creating an identity discourse which essentializes differences and establishes Russia as a conservative *alternative* to the Western model of development, as opposed to a failed or lesser consort. In the sphere of foreign policy, this not only reinforces the Kremlin narrative of Western hypocrisy and aggression, it also justifies human rights abuses and military interventionism which would otherwise be condemned under the 'universal' standards of Western civilization.

Through the example of post-Soviet Russia, one can see how national identity provides the interpretive framework through which foreign policy makers understand their role in the world and the actions of other states, as well as how this discourse can be utilized as a tool to mobilize public support behind foreign policy maneuvers. Foreign policy in turn is both shaped by constructions of national identity, and often used to forge and substantiate the narratives of national identity which best serve the regime's domestic interests. Post-Soviet Russia provides an ideal look into the mechanical processes within the co-constitutive relationship between national identity and foreign policy.

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